

One Billion Doors

David Broodryk

Sometime before dawn, a woman in Lagos wraps her child and steps out of a structure she built herself from salvaged zinc and reclaimed timber. The electricity her neighbour tapped runs a single bulb. The water comes from a vendor two hundred metres away, at three times the rate the city charges the suburbs. She does not appear in any municipal register. Her community of sixty thousand people does not appear on any official map.

She is not an anomaly.

She is the world.

How the World Has Been Moving

We talk about the global church as if it lives in the same places it always has. Conference centres in Atlanta. Seminaries in London. Megachurches in Seoul. The imagination of global Christianity is still largely shaped by institutions: buildings with signage, programmes with budgets, leaders with credentials.

But the world has been moving. Quietly, relentlessly, for seventy years. And it has been moving into informal settlements.

In 1950, three percent of the world's urban population lived in what the United Nations calls slums or informal settlements. By 2050, that figure will be half. Not three percent. Half. One in every two city-dwellers on earth will be living outside the formal systems that the church has typically required in order to operate. There are 1.12 billion people in that world right now, and the number grew by 130 million between 2015 and 2022 alone, reversing two decades of slow progress.¹ Sub-Saharan Africa absorbs the sharpest edge of this: more than half its urban population already lives in informal housing.² Dhaka and Kinshasa and Lagos are each between forty and one hundred times larger than they were in 1950.³

The cities of the Global South are not growing toward the formal city. They are growing through informality. Informality is not the exception. It is the pattern.

Mike Davis called these places *Planet of Slums*.⁴ A billion people constructing their own city, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, with scrap timber and recycled brick and salvaged

corrugated iron, without title deeds or building permits or trunk sewer connections. The state did not plan for them. The state, in many cases, actively worked to keep them out, through pass laws and vagrancy ordinances and forced removals. They built anyway.

And the church, by and large, has not known what to do with them.

What We Sent

I have been in enough of these places to know what the usual response looks like. Send a team. Build a hall. Run a programme. Hand out food. Take photographs. Go home.

Not because the people who go are bad. They are not. They go because they care. But the model carries an assumption embedded so deeply that few ever examine it: that meaningful Christian witness requires infrastructure the poor do not have and cannot build. A building. A sound system. A trained clergy. A legal entity with a bank account.

Research on disciple-making movements has documented the compounding cost of the institutional model: the average investment required per baptism in the United States rose from roughly \$17,500 in 1900 to over \$500,000 by the early 2000s.⁵ The investment compounds. The multiplication does not. Programmes that depend on foreign money stop the moment that money stops. Leaders who are paid by outside funders answer to outside funders. The gospel, dressed in those foreign clothes, never quite lands as good news.

It lands as charity.

Kibera sits on the south-western edge of Nairobi. Somewhere between 250,000 and a million people live there, depending on who is counting and what they are counting. The numbers are disputed because the settlement is not supposed to exist. No tenure. No services. No official recognition. Churches have worked in Kibera for decades. Some have done extraordinary things. But the dominant model has been centrifugal: draw people out of the community, into a building, toward a service, on a scheduled day, in a formal register of behaviour that belongs to somewhere else. And the community itself, dense and relational and ferociously interconnected, goes largely unreached because the gospel is being aimed at individuals who must first cross a threshold into a foreign space.

Dharavi in Mumbai. Vila Prudente in São Paulo. Orangi Town in Karachi. The settlements of Port-au-Prince. The bidonvilles of Dakar. The pattern repeats across every continent. The formal church is present, often heroically present. But it is working around the edges of the actual social fabric rather than through it.

What the Settlement Knows

There is something the slum understands that the suburb has largely forgotten.

Community is not an amenity. It is a survival strategy.

In the informal settlement, you do not survive alone. You survive through networks.

Neighbours share water. Women pool resources. Young men enforce a rough order on the street. Information flows fast, person to person, because there is no official channel and the need is urgent. Trust is built not through institutions but through proximity, through repeated encounter, through showing up when things go wrong.

This is not a deficit. It is a pre-existing network through which the gospel can move at speed, if it is allowed to travel in the right form.

“Come and see,” Philip says to Nathanael (**John 1:46**). “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did,” the Samaritan woman says to her village (**John 4:29**). It does not move through strangers announcing information. It moves through trusted voices inside existing community. And the informal settlement, precisely because it depends on community for survival, is dense with exactly those trusted voices. The question is whether the gospel can travel through them rather than around them.

That is the challenge. And it is also the opportunity.

What Stands in the Way

The barriers are real and they are not small.

Land insecurity shapes everything. When you do not know whether your home will still be standing in six months because the government has announced a clearance programme, your time horizon shrinks. You are not thinking about ten years from now. You are thinking about this week. Discipleship that takes the long view struggles in communities structured around the short view, not because people do not want depth but because depth requires a stability they cannot assume.

Transience compounds this. The informal settlement is constantly in motion. People arrive from rural areas, stay for years or decades, sometimes return, sometimes move on to the next settlement. The social fabric is denser than it looks from outside but it is also more fluid than the suburban church is used to. Building a stable gathered community is harder when the community itself is in motion.

Crime and violence carve the settlement into micro-territories. In some places you cannot cross from one block to the next without navigating a geography of gang control that the outsider cannot see. The church that arrives from outside does not know the map. And the pastor who comes from one micro-territory has no access to the one fifty metres away.

Poverty itself is not the barrier most people assume it to be. The poor are enormously generous. They will share what they have. But the expectation that church requires money, that leadership requires pay, that programmes require budget, those expectations land in a place that cannot sustain them and the work collapses the moment the outside money runs out.

The Pattern That Holds

What actually works looks almost nothing like what we have been sending.

It is indigenous. Led by people who are from the settlement, who know the map, who carry existing relationships, who are trusted already. It does not import a model from outside; it grows from inside the social fabric of the place.

It is simple enough that anyone who has understood it can immediately teach it to someone else. Not dependent on expertise or equipment or venue. A Bible, a question, and a person willing to sit with a neighbour and ask: what does this say? What does this mean? What will you do about it?

It multiplies through households, not through Sunday services. Through kitchens and stoeps and backyards. Through the networks the community already uses for survival.

And it is obedient. Not sophisticated. Not credentialed. The person who reads the text, decides what it asks of them, and does it. Then gathers a small group and shows them how.

Loyiso Matu had been a pastor in Motherwell for years before he encountered this pattern. He had given himself to open-air evangelism and tent crusades in one of the Eastern Cape's hardest communities, a place of child-headed families and mob justice where the formal legal system has largely stopped working. After four years he had twenty-two members. Something was missing but he could not name it.

In 2018, a man named Jeremy showed him disciple-making through the same Scriptures Loyiso had been preaching for years. "Because I also knew those Scriptures," Loyiso said later, "it was hard to argue. But I had been teaching those same passages for years without seeing what he was showing me. That was humbling." He went back to his twenty-two members and trained them. Young people started Bible discovery groups at high school, at primary school, in the

community. He understood then what had been wrong. He had not been multiplying disciples. He had been the lid.

Cities behave like living reefs, not construction sites. You cannot stack neat house-groups in straight lines and expect the reef to cooperate. It does not. The complex, non-linear social fabric of the informal settlement will absorb a rigid programme and dissolve it without leaving a mark. What survives is what is living: simple enough to reproduce, light enough to travel through existing relationships, rooted enough in the text that it does not need an expert to carry it.

Dumisa Ndabambi in Motherwell does not advertise. She does not run programmes. She makes clothes, by hand, from whatever material she can find, because a calling she received in a dream told her to tell people that Jesus is alive, and her hands have always known how to make something out of maybe nothing. Young women with histories of abuse and addiction simply find their way to her door, “Sisi, I just came to greet.” Three of them began a Discovery Bible Study. They told their friends. This is the pattern Jesus taught. Twelve ordinary people. No building. No budget. No credentials.

The instruction was to go, to stay in homes that welcomed them, to eat what was offered, to heal the sick, and to say: the Kingdom of God has come near. Not an invitation to a service. A declaration inside a household.

Five Words

Mike Magingxa was sentenced to life plus thirty-seven years. He sat in St Albans Maximum Security Prison, his card reading two words: life sentence. His mother died while he was inside. His father died. Five children he could not reach. He was not a praying man. He did not have the vocabulary for it.

Eventually, with nothing else left, he started saying five words. Nothing more:

“God, if you can help me. Only.”

The appeal found the original conviction was wrong. The court ordered his immediate release, not parole, not a reduced sentence. He was free. That Sunday he walked into a church in Motherwell and gave his life to Jesus. He said he had already decided. The church was just where he said it out loud.

Mike now works with Loyiso’s team. He runs fitness sessions with teenage boys in Motherwell, young men who could become what he was, unless someone shows them there is a completely different way to live. That is what a movement looks like on the ground. Not a programme.

Not a budget line. A man who prayed five words from the bottom of a sentence that should have lasted the rest of his life, now showing boys there is another way.

Why This Place

This is why what is happening in the townships of South Africa matters beyond South Africa.

The township is a specific form of informal settlement, born from apartheid's spatial violence, carrying particular wounds and particular resilience. But the dynamics that shape it, the distrust of outside leadership, the dense relational fabric, the collapse of formal institutions, the hunger that emerges from deep disillusionment, those dynamics are not unique to KwaZulu-Natal. They are the dynamics of every informal settlement on earth.

KASI was born from a conversation in a Durban meeting room. A group of township leaders had spent an evening wrestling with one question: how do you penetrate the Kasi? The models they knew were not working. Loyiso arrived late. When he began to speak the next morning, one of the men who had been wrestling all evening said: "Brother, it seems like you were in the room last night." He had not been. He had just lived it. DZ Mkhwanazi, Phillip from Mpumalanga, Lovings from Johannesburg, Loyiso from the Eastern Cape: men who had each been trying to find the right formula in their own context, discovering in that room that they had been asking the same question. The name they chose was township slang, reclaimed from the apartheid terminology used to designate where Black South Africans were forced to live. Kasi. Spoken now with pride.

What KASI Leaders is learning about how movements form in the Kasi, what works and what does not, what kinds of leaders emerge and how they lead, what obedience looks like in a context where the systems have comprehensively failed, that learning is not provincial. It is prototype.

The Lausanne Movement's State of the Great Commission report documents how the centre of global Christianity has shifted decisively: in 1900, eighty percent of the world's Christians lived in Europe or North America; by 2050, eighty percent will live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁶ The fastest-growing expressions of Christianity are expanding at their sharpest rates in exactly the same informal urban contexts that the formal church has the least capacity to reach.

The people of the informal settlement are not at the margins of what God is doing in the world. They are close to the centre of it. God has a long history of choosing the overlooked places. He did not send his Son to the Roman forum or the Greek academy. He sent him to a region most people in Jerusalem would have preferred not to name.

“Can anything good come from Nazareth?” (**John 1:46**) The question has always been about geography before it is about theology.

The Kasi is Nazareth. And Kibera. And Dharavi. And ten thousand other places with no place on any official map.

One Billion Doors

DZ Mkhwanazi is still going. Thirteen years after he was the only one who stayed.

So is Phillip in Mpumalanga. And Loyiso in the Eastern Cape. And Lovings in Johannesburg. And a growing network of men and women across South Africa’s townships who picked up the pattern and started teaching it to their neighbours before they had fully understood it themselves. That is how it always spreads. Not when people have mastered it. When they have caught it.

In cities, you cannot build a pipeline and push the gospel through it. The city is not a machine. It is a reef. Alive, non-linear, relentlessly adaptive. The movement that survives in it does not impose form on the flow. It finds the flow and follows it. Through Dumisa’s sewing table. Through Mike’s fitness sessions. Through the five words of a man in a maximum security cell who had nothing left to say but who needed to say something.

There are one billion doors in the informal settlements of the world. Most of them belong to people who have already lost faith in the institution. In the programme. In the politician. In the preachers who promised and did not deliver.

Which means most of them are ready for something that is not an institution.

The question is not whether God is moving in these places.

He is.

The question is whether we are willing to learn what it looks like when he moves in a place where there is no building, no system, and no one in charge.

That question is not just for South Africa.

It is for everyone who cares about what happens next.

Notes

1. UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2022: Envisaging the Future of Cities* (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2022). The report records a global slum population of 1.12 billion in 2022, an increase of 130 million since 2015. Available at unhabitat.org/wcr/2022.
2. UN SDG Progress Report 2021, Goal 11. United Nations Statistics Division, unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/goal-11.
3. UN World Urbanization Prospects and city-level datasets. Lagos grew from approximately 300,000 in 1950 to over 15 million today; Kinshasa from under 300,000 to 17 million; Dhaka from 400,000 to over 22 million.
4. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).
5. Widely cited in DMM literature. See *Mission Frontiers* (missionfrontiers.org) and David Watson and Paul Watson, *Contagious Disciple Making* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2014). Figures vary by methodology; the trajectory of rising cost as institutional models scale is consistent across studies.
6. Lausanne Movement, *State of the Great Commission Report* (2023). Available at lausanne.org/report.